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Labor's Attitude

This bulletin contains the wonderful address of Samuel Gompers, president American Federation of Labor, delivered at the Lexington Avenue Theater, New York City, February 22, 1918.

It should be carefully read by all who wish to know the attitude of organized labor toward the war. Additional copies may be secured gratis by addressing

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Address

by

Samuel Gompers

(Address delivered by Samuel Gompers, President American Federation of Labor, on Washington's Birthday, Feb. 22, 1918, at Lexington Avenue Theater, New York City.)

I doubt that there existed, or now exists, in all the world a man who is so pronounced a pacifist as was I. I belonged to every peace society of which I knew anything. An officer in some form or other of each of them, a speaker of nearly all of them, within the sphere of my opportunities. In addition, as a union man, a labor man, an internationalist in spirit, I had believed, came to believe, that it would be impossible for such a war to have occurred at any time after the international understanding and pledge of the workers of nearly all the civilized countries; and I really believed in the pledge, in the spirit of it. * * * I had permitted myself to live in a fool's paradise. I believed that when men solemnly pledged themselves and those in whose name they had the authority to speak, they would go the limit in their own countries to prevent a rupture of international peace. * * * I was so in love with peace that I could have, without flinching, died for the cause of peace. [Applause.]

AMERICA IS AN IDEAL.

Almost out of the clear sky came this declaration of war, and I found that the men who had pledged to me and mine, my fellows, flying to the colors of the greatest autocrat of all

time, the modern buccaneer of the world, the type of the intellectual scientific murderer, to fly to the colors upon his order, to attack the brothers whose lives they vouched to protect. I awoke. From then until now and until the peace of the world is assured I count myself transformed from an ultra pacifist to a living, breathing, fighting man. [Applause.] No one who has known me fairly intimately has ever accused me of running away from an honorable contest. And it is not of much interest what any one man believes or is, but that which he tries to inculcate upon his fellow citizens. I believe that in our country we have the greatest opportunities existing of any country upon the face of the globe. [Applause.] America is not perfect; the Republic of the United States is not perfect; it has the imperfections of the human; and inasmuch as we are not perfect, we have not been able to make a perfect, democratic Republic; but it is the best country on the face of the earth. [Applause.]

America is not merely a name. It is not merely a land. It is not merely a country, nor is it merely a continent. America is a symbol; it is an ideal, the hopes of the world can be expressed in the ideal—America. [Applause.] The man in America, with the opportunities

afforded, with the right of expression, with the right of determination, with the right of creating a political revolution by well-ordered methods, who will not or does not appreciate that it is his duty to stand by such a country in such stress and in such a storm, who is unwilling to stand up and be counted as a man in this fight for the maintenance of these ideals—is unworthy of the privilege of living in this country.

I have no quarrel with the man or the group of men who differ with me, or the course which I pursue, in anything. I doubt that there is anyone who welcomes expressions of dissent or disapproval more than I do. I am willing to battle with him mentally, argumentatively, in any honorable way that is provided among men, self-respecting men and women. Constructive criticism is of the greatest benefit to those who are criticized. It is the nagger, the mean, contemptible, nagging one that has no purpose other than negative and destructive that is unworthy the consideration of decent men and women. [Applause.]

HOW WAR WAS DECLARED.

Who declared war in Germany? Was it even that mugwumpery called the Reichstag? [Laughter and applause.] No; not even that. But who declared war in Germany? Was it the people of Germany? No. It was the Kaiser and his immediate military clique. That autocratic clique by one accord determined that the time for which they had been planning had arrived, and then was the time to strike the blow. Now, you have no need to enter into a full discussion of all the matter which may be of vital interest, and no doubt you know them just as well, if not better, than I do, but here is the point: In the United States of America it was not a Kaiser, a King, or even the President of the United States who declared war; it was the Congress of the United States, the men and the woman [laughter] elected by the people of the United States. [Applause.] There must be lodged somewhere in the Government the power to declare that its life is endangered and there-

fore has the right to strike a blow in the defense of that country. In our Republic that authority is vested in the Congress of the United States—the Congress elected by the people of the United States, the Congress elected, in many States, by the votes of the men and the women of those States. * * *

In truth, the state of war existed from January, 1916, when the attacks were made upon our industrial plants and our transportation lines [applause], the murdering of our men and women and our children in cold blood. If that did not constitute a state of war I would like to know what did. The point that I want to make clear is this: That it was not an autocrat, it was not the President, but that it was the representatives of the people, elected by the people to the Congress of the United States, the only authority recognized by the Constitution of our country, who realized the situation as it was and declared that a state of war existed between our Republic and the Imperial German Government. That body authorized the President to use all the available means and all the forces of the country to carry into effect and purpose the resolution of the Congress of the United States, and to make good this declaration that the democracy of the United States is not impotent or incompetent to defend itself. [Applause.]

Until the only authority in the country had decided the question whether we should recognize that war existed or not, until that declaration was made it was the privilege, as it was the right of every man to express his own view whether we should recognize this fact and go to war or not. But when the constituted authority in our Republic declared war, that was a decision of the people of this country, and from that decision there is and can be no appeal. [Applause.] To follow the thought that it is now permissible to discuss whether we should continue in the war or to retreat from it reminds me of the situation as it now exists in Russia.

WHAT ABOUT RUSSIA ?

I think that every American, every liberty-loving man and woman throughout the whole

world, was thrilled when we learned that the Russian people had overthrown the Czar and his Empire and established a Government based upon some sort of democratic conception. Not long after, under the leadership of so-called radicals, they undertook to institute in the army the democratic thought that before any battle was to be undertaken the soldiers should vote upon it. [Laughter.] In theory that might be fairly good. As an academic discussion, it does not sound bad [laughter]; but when you have opposed to you a well-organized gang of scientific murderers [applause], who have their guns leveled at you, that is not the time to discuss whether you should defend yourself or not. That is the time to fight [applause]. * * * Anarchy prevails in Russia, and the radicalism of the Bolsheviks of Russia has given the people, not land, not bread, not peace; and instead of finding this great people of Russia standing erect and fighting for their homes and for their lives, we find them without power or will, helpless before the Kaiser's hordes and the forces of autocracy, powerless to maintain their own freedom or to realize their own ideals. Yes, this radical, this radical gang there, and those who are showing their heads here, to them must be laid the charge of the undoing of the great people of Russia. If the so-called radicals of America would have their way, you would find in our United States the same condition as it is in Russia now.

I am rather fond of life. I have had 68 years of it, and I am not tired of it at all. [Applause.] I want to live. I don't know of anything better than living. I am not anxious to find out, but I don't want to live when I can't maintain my own self-respect. Indeed, I feel that I could not live in the atmosphere of unfreedom. There have been at least two occasions in my life when I was threatened with imprisonment; on two different occasions, and each for a year, because I undertook to express my judgment, and we were then at peace, not at war. But I undertook to express my judgment, express my opinion as an American citizen against a decree issued by one of our

courts in a private controversy between two interests. I merely mention it, as I was willing to take a chance, whatever that may mean, for the maintenance of the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

So, just imagine—it does not take much to see the point at issue—if the German militarist system could win—it can't, but if it could win, how would that victory be accomplished, or what would its immediate result be? I know that we have been living in the thought that we are so far removed from the whole world that we are perfectly safe. But if it were possible for the German militarist machine to be so efficient that it could conquer France and England, the first result of that conquest would be, without question, the taking over from France and England of their combined navies. Without taking over these navies, as the result of German conquest, she could not be the complete winner; and imagine, with the military forces, the navies of England and France, and her vessels of commerce and transports, what would become of the vaunted safety of the home and fireside of the American people?

Referring to a remark made by Harry Lauder, and of which I was so glad to hear our honored Secretary speak, he said, in speaking to a lot of our boys in the camp: "Don't you for a moment imagine that you are going to send your troops over to save France or to save England. When you send your troops over you will be saving yourselves. Either you must fight over there or you will fight over here." [Applause.]

To me this war has quite a different meaning than almost any other war in history of which I have read. It began through the machinations of the German Kaiser and in the splendid responses made by France and England and Belgium. In Prussia they were all exulting, but when the Republic of the United States entered into this world struggle it ceased to be a war and became at once a crusade for freedom and justice and liberty. [Applause.] I hold it to be the duty of every man to give every ounce of energy in fighting,

in producing, in helping in any way that he can, that this crusade shall be a triumph for the world. If we may not be able to abolish war for all time, at least let us make the conditions such that a war of this character may never again occur, or at least shall be long deferred.

LABOR AND OUR INDUSTRIES.

For years and years the workers of America, realizing the position in which we are placed in this most favored country of ours, pressed home upon the agencies of government, the agencies of industry, the agencies of all activities, that inasmuch as the workers performed so large a service for society and civilization, the human side of the workers should receive the highest consideration, and that no agency of government or of industry should be constituted without the representative of the workers as part of that agency. [Applause.]

I never have asked anything for myself. I have no favor to ask. I have no personal pleas to make. I speak for a cause. I speak for the masses of the workers as well as the masses of all our people. [Applause.] For, no matter, the meanest of all of them, I consider it my duty and privilege to say a word for him, even when perhaps he might repudiate me. But, as the result of this war or crusade, this principle for which labor has been contending has found recognition in the department of Government.

My friends, do you know how thoroughly in sympathy with the high and noble thought and work and associations of the labor movement are the members of the President's Cabinet and the President of the United States himself? That has come and it is coming to a larger extent with every development of our time. Does anyone think that when peace shall have come again to our beloved country and to the people of the world the representatives of these various agencies will be in conflict? Surely not. The principle is recognized. Hence this means while we are fighting for democracy and against autocracy, in France and soon in Belgium and then into Germany [applause], then in the meantime

we are fighting to maintain democracy at home. [Applause.]

WHEN WILL PEACE COME?

Let me say to you that, talking of international conferences with representatives of the enemy countries, we are not going to permit ourselves to be lulled into a fancied security and, under the guise of radicalism, go back a hundred years. [Applause.] Why, the Kaiser's minions would not give a passport to anyone unless he would carry out the policy of the autocracy of Germany.

Then, to meet in council with these men, gaining from us our confidence, swerving us from the path of duty, trying to influence us that the Governments of these democracies are, after all, only capitalistic. I have said, and I say it in the name of the American labor movement—the convention of which in November declared it unalterably, the executive council of which, in session at Washington last week, affirmed it in most emphatic terms, and the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy reaffirmed it by the resolutions presented here this evening—we all say in essence: "You can't talk peace with us now; you can't talk international conferences with us now. Either you smash your autocracy, or, by the gods, we will smash it for you. [Great applause.] Before you talk peace terms, before you bring about international conferences, get out of France. [Applause.] Get back from Belgium, back to Germany, and then we will talk peace." [Applause.]

One of the great causes of this war was the obsession of this German military caste that democracies are impotent and inefficient; that France was a sort of democracy, with an army that was in a way inefficient because of the long-standing contention of Alsace-Lorraine. Germany knew that if she went to war she would have a rather hard fight with France, but surely would conquer her. She had an extreme contempt for the democracy of Great Britain and for any army Great Britain could raise. To the German mind, as it has been tutored for this last half a century, there is noth-

ing efficient except it is governmental unless it is directed by an autocratic head. The same contempt the Germans had for America. They believed us to be such devotees and lovers of the almighty dollar that we could never stand for an ideal and make sacrifices for its achievement. That is the great mistake which autocracies have ever made—they do not know. They have never known that once touch the heart, the conscience, and the spirit of the democratic peoples, they will make more sacrifices than any conscripts under compulsion. [Applause.] So we find ourselves in this war, in this crusade.

LABOR'S DECLARATION.

A month before the war was declared, with some degree of prescience, the executive council of the American Federation of Labor called a conference of the representative officials of the American labor movement, and there a great discussion ensued, and there a declaration was finally adopted. I am going to ask you to let me read the closing two paragraphs.

We, the officers of the national and international trade-unions of America, in conference assembled, in the Capital of our Nation, hereby pledge ourselves, in peace or in war, in stress or in storm, to stand unreservedly by the standards of liberty and the safety and preservation of the institutions and ideals of our Republic. In this solemn hour of our Nation's life it is our earnest hope that our Republic may be safeguarded in its unswerving desire for peace; that our people may be spared the horrors and the burden of war; that they may have the opportunity to cultivate and develop the arts of peace, human brotherhood, and a higher civilization; but despite all our endeavors and hopes should our country be drawn into the maelstrom of the European conflict, we, with these ideals of liberty and justice herein declared as the indispensable basis for national policies, offer our services to our country in every field of activity to defend, safeguard, and preserve the Republic of the United States of America against its enemies, whosoever they may be, and we call upon our fellow workers and fellow citizens in the holy name of labor, justice, freedom, and humanity to devotedly and patriotically give like service. [Applause.]

That declaration was adopted by a unanimous vote a month before the declaration of war. At the convention of the American Fed-

eration of Labor in November, the President of the United States, that great leader and spokesman of the democracies of the world [great applause] came and delivered a message to labor, and through that body, to the great masses of the people of America, and through them to the liberty loving men and women of the whole world. Did you ever think, my friends, of the curious situation in our country? The Government of the country carrying on this war are unanimously pacifists, from the President, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of War, the Secretary of Labor—all of them ultrapacifists—before the war. [Laughter.]

If a gang of organized assassins were to come into this community, ready to pounce upon the innocent people, and they came upon the block in which you lived, and attacked your neighbor on the corner, what kind of a man would you be if you didn't get up and at them, rather than wait until they came into your own room? That is the situation with our country and our people in this great world struggle. There is not anything that will contribute so much to winning this war than the unity of spirit as well as the unity of action among the people of our country to make, if necessary, the extreme sacrifice that freedom shall live. I know that it may mean much loss and many heartaches, but we know that there were sacrifice and heartaches among the men and the women of our revolutionary times.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Who is there in America to-day who looks back with regret on the sacrifices made when the Declaration of Independence was coined for the world and a new nation created? Who regrets that anyone belonging to them, no matter how near or how remote, sacrificed his life and his all that America should be born? The war of our civilized life, our Civil War, when the struggle was for the maintenance of the Union and the abolition of human slavery, who among the gallant men on both sides, or either side, now regrets that the fight

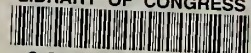
was made and the sacrifices borne in order to make good that this Nation is one and indivisible and that on its shores and under its flag slavery is forever abolished? [Applause.] Who doubts that? Our War with Spain, small though it was, meant sacrifices. It meant Cuba free and independent. Is there a man or woman in this audience or in this country who regrets the sacrifice that was made that Cuba might be made free?

So the men and the women of the future will regard this struggle as we now look upon those struggles to which I have just referred. They will call us blessed, every man and every

woman, who has given something to this great cause of human justice and freedom, to feel the satisfaction, the exultation, the exaltation of youth and energy renewed in them in a great cause, the greatest that has ever been presented to the peoples of any country and in any time. It is a privilege to live in this time and to help in this common fight. [Applause.]

With all my heart and spirit I appeal to my fellow citizens, to my fellow workers, to make this one great slogan, the watchword from now on until triumph shall perch upon our arms: "Unity, solidarity, energy, and the will to fight and to win." [Great applause.]

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